

## A LETTER TO MY STUDENTS (2001)\*

My dear young friends,

As I prepare to depart the corridors and Mexican-style structures of your august institution, I am more aware, I suspect, that most of you realize that I will hardly be leaving a flood of tear-struck and mournful students in my wake. Quite on the contrary, it seems to me, many of you will be more than a little bit glad to see me go. For, I well realize, many of the expectations engendered, and nurtured, by your previous instructors in what we—at time rather euphemistically—call “Creative Writing” have been disappointed, if not downright dashed, by my presence among you over the past ten weeks.

Several weeks before the end of this quarter, I was, indeed, struck by a certain “Love Letter and Thank You Note” addressed to you and my other temporary colleagues by one of the younger, departing Creative Writing professors—a warm and seemingly charming person, I might add—in which she professed her devotion to what she described as “student-centered, relationship-based teaching,” and attributed her own, self-described success (which, in my own mind, I have come to equate, simply, with popularity) to the fact that she “love(s) my students.” She “started loving my students,” she went on, “because I saw such inspiring, fragile, invincible, vulnerability beauty in them.” She saw, our young poet did, “the same kind of beauty in them I see in the just-about-to-fall spring petals on the trees . . .”

Not satisfied with providing her own encomiums to her capacities as a teacher, our young colleague—whom many of you had as a teacher—also furnished testimony from one of her students’ mothers, who—after having witnessed what I have no doubt was the unadorned praise of her offspring’s work—said to our erstwhile young professor, “I wish the media would cover stories like this—we’d all feel a lot more hope about our future in this country.”

This being California, our young, about-to-go-on-to-greener-pastures, professor, of course, couldn’t simply stop with an outsider’s praise. “When people feel loved, nourished, supported and respected; when

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people feel recognized, seen, and known; when people feel unique and valued,” she went on, “they feel confident enough to explore their gifts, to develop those gifts, and to make significant contributions to the human community.” Amen. And here, in her defense, my younger colleague is probably also a victim of what a friend of mine contends (and I agree) has become, increasingly, the purpose of university life itself: the presentation of moments of self-gratification, little assurances and narcissistic stabilizers that confirm: yes, I am smart, I am creative, I am loved.

Personally, however, I prefer Goethe’s approach—of which you will come, in time, like it or not, to see the wisdom—to my colleague down the hall’s: “If I love you,” the great poet wisely asked, “what business is it of yours?”

And now, my young friends, at the risk of both dashing a dear mother’s hopes for the future, and of relieving any sadness you may be experiencing at my departure, let me make a terrible confession: I do not love you. No—while I have come to like several of you quite a bit, admire some others, feel a certain sympathy for some, and a certain rather cool distance towards others, I must confess that for none of you have I developed that rare and precious and deeply human feeling I would describe as love.

Yet I do, on the other hand, harbor a more democratic, and, I would maintain, a nobler sentiment towards each and every one of you alike: I want you to learn something from me. I want to feel that I have done something here (beyond, that is, having my own love-and-adulation-hungry ego massaged) to earn my rather modest salary, and preserve my self-esteem.

Nor, let me assure you, am I someone incapable of feeling that deeper, and perhaps loftier, emotion we call love. I love my son and my close friends. I have loved both my wives in different ways, and several lovers before and between them. But I was not brought here—your former professor’s mushy rhetoric notwithstanding—to love you . . . but, rather, to teach you, as I hope I have, something concerning the beauties, challenges, hardships, joys and dignity of making, and reading, poems. I was brought here, not to act as an oracle of love, but, because there is something I presumably knew a bit more about than you do at your still-tender ages—namely, being a writer—and in the hope that, with a bit of luck and application on all our parts, we might together learn something about that difficult and demanding vocation.

Several years ago, a friend of mine, a professional and long-tenured professor of Creative Writing, warned me—in a gesture both well-meaning and sincere—not to “shit in your own backyard,” an act for which my ancestors, the Germans, have a much more poignant, and

efficient, term: *nestbeschmutzer*—i.e. someone who dirties his own nest, a term popular among the Nazis as well. But, thanks in no small part to colleagues like the one who has showered you with her love and testimonials to “the endless possibilities of the human spirit,” I have long ago ceased to think of the world of Creative Writing and its instructors as my “nest” (much as I would like to think I have a nest of sort in the world of literature) nor have I continued, except for occasional forays such as this one, to inhabit that backyard. So I can afford, as I am doing now, to take liberties, preferring to cite a line from one of my own generation’s better poets, Bob Dylan: “When you ain’t got nothin’, you’ve got nothin’ to lose.”

On our first day of class this quarter, I told you that, insofar as I was concerned, there were three possible things to be gained from a class in Creative Writing: (1) the ability to become better, more discriminating, readers; (2) a greater capacity for truth-telling and, with it, the acceptance of hard truths from others, and (3) a greater respect for the difficulty, rarity—and, when it happens, joy—of making even a good, much less a great, poem. If I have done my job—whether you have come to “love” me or not—you may have learned something about all three, and I can leave here a satisfied, if not universally beloved, teacher.

Which leads me to yet another confession you may, or may not, want to hear: I don’t need your love. (And is there, I wonder, a more abused, and misused, word in all of the English language than “love” to begin with?) For I am, in that sense, a lucky man: I already have the love of most, if not all, of those whose love I need. What I “need” from you—or at least would prefer—is something much more befitting of our relationship: namely, your respect. And respect—let me assure you, from the lofty vantage point of mid-age—is something both more enduring, and more necessary of being earned, than are the vagaries and vicissitudes of what we so often mistakenly call “love.”

At this moment, at least, I am well aware that you are under the impression that you have been “nurtured” and “loved” by certain teachers who have been far more popular with you than I have been. But let me let you in on yet another trade secret: You have been neither loved nor nurtured, my young friends. You have been lied to and betrayed. The mother’s milk that flows from such breasts may temporarily satisfy your ravenous appetites for praise, but it is not, I assure you, a very nourishing brew.

You have been told that the not good is good, that the unworthy is the worthy. Rather than being commended (when, that is, it was worth commending) on the hard work and noble intentions of your ambition, you have been praised for the beauty and rightness (for poetry, as the poet Howard Nemerov once put it, is “getting something right in

language”) of its product. And—perhaps worst of all, to paraphrase Auden—rather than being respected for wanting to learn how to play an instrument, you have been virtually handed—without either hard work or a genuine apprenticeship—a seat in the orchestra. This, today, is known as “nurturing”; once upon a time, it was called something else: lying. And to give you this, as a friend of mine—a long-tenured professor at Stanford and Johns Hopkins and, now, the University of Chicago—recently reminded me, “is not only to give [you] nothing at all, it’s to deprive [you] of the one thing we have to hold onto: real work and an objective correlative.”

Nor has anyone, I suspect, bothered to acquaint you with the dark subtext that underlies all this nurturing and lying and love: That dishonesty—for a writer even more than for most “ordinary” people—is an acquired, and contagious, habit. That, if you are lied to by your teachers, and encouraged to lie to one another and, ultimately, to lie to yourself, the habit of lying will ultimately permeate both your soul and your work, and you will be incapable—even should you be otherwise graced by the gifts of language and subject and time and peace of mind—of uttering in your work that most difficult, and necessary, of truths: the truth, as Matthew Arnold put it, “of what we feel indeed.”

And so, my young friends, I depart from you with, perhaps, not the most stellar student evaluations, but also—as I mentioned to you on the first day of class—with the luxury of not needing them, seeing as how the department of which I aspire to be a tenured member has no office here, nor at any other university. And if, some day, as has happened to me on numerous occasions in the past, I should receive a letter from some—or at least one—of you, saying “although I didn’t particularly like you at the time, or feel sufficiently praised by you, I realize now that I learned something about poetry, and about the struggles and exhilarations of being a writer, from being in your class,” it will, I assure you, feel as good to me as being praised by one of your mothers, or covered by the media.

It will even—let me assure you—feel better than being loved.